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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM SOCI KDEM KZ
SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: PRIME MINISTER MASIMOV BECOMES COUNTRY'S MOST
DISTINGUISHED BLOGGER

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a surprising development, Kazakhstan's Prime Minister Karim Masimov recently posted an edition of opposition paper "Respublika" on his government blog. This is the latest move in Masimov's blogging experiment, which is aimed at using the latest technology to increase communication with the population and to build up the government's image of openness. Since going live on January 1, Masimov's blog has grown in popularity, with readers raising a wide range of issues. Masimov addresses some of the issues himself and delegates others to his ministers. On his order, all the ministers except Foreign Minister Tazhin have also started blogs. Masimov's blogging initiative has been welcomed by the media and readers, although there are skeptics who say this is just a public relations stunt. END SUMMARY.

PRIME MINISTER POSTS OPPOSITION PAPER

¶3. (SBU) On February 20, in a move that surprised many in the media community, Prime Minister Karim Masimov posted an edition of the opposition newspaper "Respublika" on his government web-log. The posting came after the editors of "Respublika" wrote to Masimov on February 4 to complain that their printers in Astana were refusing to print the newspaper. Masimov replied that he had no control over the decisions of private businesses and offered the paper space on his blog. "Respublika" initially declined, but, after the paper's Internet website was taken down by a cyber-attack on February 13, wrote to Masimov again to take him up on his offer. With a note of "I am a man of my word," Masimov posted the paper's most recent edition in four Adobe PDF files. The move was welcomed by the blog's readers, who in their comments commended the Prime Minister for "keeping his word" and for being the first government official "who is not afraid of the opposition press." In fact, the edition of "Respublika" Masimov posted includes an article that accuses him of making money for himself through his advance knowledge of the tenge's February 4 devaluation.

MASIMOV'S BLOGGING EXPERIMENT

¶3. (SBU) Posting the paper that does not shy away from criticizing

the government is just the latest move in Masimov's experiment of using technology to reach out to regular Kazakhstanis and create an image of government openness. Masimov launched his blog on January 1, when he invited people to share their concerns and promised to read their comments personally. The initiative proved widely popular, with readers posting messages in both Kazakh and Russian on everything from the poor quality of water in Stepenogorsk and heating problems for schools in Shymkent to the status of the Kazakh language, the devaluation of the tenge, and the current economic crisis. Masimov has kept up a lively exchange with his readers, addressing some of their concerns personally and demanding action from his ministers on others. For example, during a recent Cabinet meeting he berated Justice Minister Balyiyeva for the large number of complaints he received over the quality of services of her ministry. In another instance, Masimov personally visited the public bath in Astana that bloggers said was unsanitary. It should be noted, however, that Masimov is selective about which issues he addresses -- he chose to leave unanswered the questions about the periodic blocking of a popular blogging website, LiveJournal, which is a site where President Nazarbayev's former son-in-law, Rakhat Aliyev, posts comments derogatory of the President.

OTHER MINISTERS FOLLOW SUIT

¶4. (SBU) On January 12, Masimov ordered that all ministers create blogs in order to "establish personal interaction with the people." As of today, all the ministers expect Foreign Minister Tazhin have blogs on a government portal, which can be found at <http://blogs.e.gov.kz>. (NOTE: Tazhin reports directly to President Nazarbayev rather than to Masimov. END NOTE.) Agriculture Minister Kurishbayev's blog quickly became one of the most frequently-visited, as readers from rural areas uploaded their most

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burning questions. Observers note that the most substantive blogs are those run by the Finance Minister Zhamishev and Economy and Budget Planning Minister Sultanov. Emergency Minister Bozhko is said to be the second-quickest responder after the Prime Minister. The government official that has received the most praise from blog aficionados is Agency for Government Services Chairman Aryn Orsaliyev, a 32-year-old graduate of the "Bolashak" program which sends Kazakhstanis to study abroad at government expense. Users of Orsaliyev's blog can see his photographs, join his group of friends, and look through his personal notes.

A WELCOME INITIATIVE

¶5. (SBU) The Prime Minister's blogging experiment has stirred up a lively discussion in the media. Overall, the reaction is quite positive, with many commentators welcoming the step towards openness in the government. There are some skeptics, however, who see it as a public-relations move designed to gain for him a reputation for openness and allow critics to "blow off steam," while the overall political system still remains fundamentally undemocratic. Others criticize Masimov for failing to put his "personal touch" to the postings, saying his blog is nothing more than a national "book for customer complaints." Nevertheless, Masimov's blog has become one of the most frequently-visited government websites, receiving over one hundred comments a day from teachers, students, government employees, and businessmen.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: The blogging activities of Masimov and his ministers set Kazakhstan well apart from its neighbors in using the latest technology to communicate with the public and interact with civil society. We do not have enough information to judge whether elements of the government are responsible for blocking "Respublika's" website, although it is not inconceivable that one of the intelligence services could do so. That Masimov -- who is considered one of the government's liberals -- posted the "Respublika" edition following the blockage is perhaps an indication not just that he is a man of his word, but also that he wanted to send a signal that he disapproves of the blockage. If so, it would seem that President Nazarbayev, the ultimate arbiter of what is allowed and what is not, is tolerating an unusual amount of open diversity at the upper-most levels of the government. END COMMENT.

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